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The Magazine/ Feature

The real housewives of Montecito: Meghan's relaunch as homemaker

With her brand and 'polo-mom' glossiness, Meghan Markle is shape-shifting into Martha Stewart 2.0, says **Anna Tyzak**

The Duchess of Sussex appears to be living her best tradwife life (Reuters)

She was there for her husband, Prince Harry: cheering from the sidelines before presenting him with the trophy (and a kiss) when his team won. But the Duchess of Sussex's appearance at the Royal Salute Polo Challenge for Sentebale in Wellington, Florida, last weekend was also the unveiling of her latest, as she would say, "archetype".

Dressed in a billowy white dress by local Californian brand, Heidi Merrick, with large shades and serious stilettos, Meghan was in full polo wife mode, flanked by her new bestie, Delfina Blaquier, the glamorous wife of Nacho Figueras, the David Beckham of polo.

As she rushed up to the podium to kiss her prince, she did so as his doting wife but also the face of an upcoming Netflix cookery and lifestyle show and the mumpreneur behind a new lifestyle brand, American Riviera Orchard. Martha Stewart 2.0 had arrived, in duchess form. The first products dropped on Monday, or rather a jar of strawberry jam was sent out to a carefully curated list of influencers, including Blaquier, who Meghan affectionately calls her "pwife" (polo wife).

"Strawberry jam makes me happy. And I love your jam, @AmericanRivieraOrchard!" Blaquier gushed to her [illegible] followers.

Prince Harry and Delfina Blaquier after a polo match in 2022 (PA)

Another lucky recipient, fashion designer Tracy Robbins declared that she was not sharing her jam with anyone, while model Kelly McKee Zajfen expressed her pride for her friend. Jam, though? The gauze-covered jar is faithfully presented with its handwritten batch number and embossed crest yet disappointingly staid, surely, from a woman who has spent much of her adult life petitioning for gender equality and female empowerment.

Couldn't she have sent out something a bit less twee and more original? Her father-in-law, King Charles III, has been selling Duchy of Cornwall jam since 2010. The jar, though, was a statement of intent or as McKee Zajfen puts it, "a taste of what's to come". Meghan's trademark filing suggests there will be marmalades, teas, and recipe books, nut butters and oils, cutlery, napkin rings, pet treats and, wait for it, gardening shears.

There's a name for the duchess's new persona: Tradwife and believe it or not, it's a lucrative aesthetic, inspiring more than 380 million searches on TikTok where a stream of young female influencers are merrily embracing traditional gender roles, waving their husbands off to work in frilly dresses and spending the day performing wifely duties. Except Meghan, one step ahead as always, has made it her own: polo wife is an upgrade on the traditional model, with crisper clothes, spikier stilettos and classier girlfriends.

Jam session: one of Markle's American Riviera Orchard products (Tracy Robbins/Instagram)

Harry should count himself lucky, as this is as horsey as Meghan is ever going to get. She shunned his hunting, shooting and fishing heritage early on in their relationship yet at the Santa Barbara Polo and Racquet Club, drinking mezcal negronis with her friends Rebel Wilson, Serena Williams and *Suits* actress Abigail Spencer, she has found a manicured patch of common ground.

It's presumably Delfina, however, who inspired her polo wife transformation: Blaquier is an enviably cool landscape architect who homeschools four children as they travel the world with Figueras on the polo circuit, while also somehow finding the time to run her own lifestyle blog and fashion labels. Unlike the stereotype playboy polo player, by her accounts, Nacho, who is the face of Ralph Lauren Black, is a devoted family man, who has said he would give his life for his friend Prince Harry and describes the duchess as "incredible", marvelling at how she "gave up everything for the man she loves".

While Montecito socialite Kiki Astor, author of 2022 polo bonkbuster, *Stick & Ball* who spends Sundays during polo season at the Santa Barbara, claims polo to be a macho and "hyper sexual sport" with everyone having affairs, the sport's Jilly Cooper associations appear to be lost on Meghan. So enthralled is she by "the sport of kings" that she will be acting as co-executive producer with her husband on a new Netflix series about polo (hence the film crew following them last weekend).

The Sussexes with polo player Nacho Figueras and Delfina Blaquier (Reuters)

According to a public relations expert who used to work with the Royals, American Riviera Orchard ingeniously combines the tradwife aesthetic with cottage core – the idealisation of quaint rural life. "Add polo to the mix and you have your target audience: polo is all about sex, female power and it's a little bit racy – the perfect catnip for an aspirational lifestyle brand," she says.

Not that one would call American Riviera Orchard racy. It is made patently clear in the promo video, as the duchess arranges flowers and larks mysteriously in her Santa Barbara mansion wearing a black ball gown, that it will not be knocking wellness queen Gwyneth Paltrow's $250m lifestyle brand, Goop, off its perch. There'll be no sex toys or V-steam equipment available on American Riviera Orchard. It's at most innocently sexy, a celebration of domesticity and the beauty and deliciousness of coastal California.

The duchess joins a line of celebrities currently trying their hand at farm to table: Julianne Moore, Will Ferrell and LeBron James sell honey from their own gardens via the Flamingo Estate brand for up to £280 a jar; *Stranger Things* actor Noah Schnapp recently launched a hazelnut spread, while Tom Hanks has gone into coffee.

Blaquier and Figueras arrive for Harry and Meghan's wedding in 2018 (Getty)

American Riviera Orchard is much more than a celebrity endorsement, though. One could argue that a food and homeware brand is a natural next step for the duchess who has always loved cooking and entertaining – remember how on the night Harry proposed she'd lovingly prepared a roast chicken in the tiny kitchen at Nottingham Cottage, their first home at Kensington Palace.

American Riviera Orchard, which has been in development for more than a year, is in many ways a big sister to The Tig, the lifestyle blog she was writing when she met Harry, which she described as "a hub for the discerning palate – those with a hunger for food, travel, fashion and beauty" and named after her favourite red, Tignanello, which sells for $150 a bottle. The nostalgic SoCal lifestyle she is selling is the same one she fled the UK for with Harry and Archie in 2020, which might mean it's a bit close to the bone for the Royal family.

Meghan could be making big bucks selling the nostalgic SoCal lifestyle (AP)

To fully understand it, they'll need to familiarise themselves with the websites of Californian clothing brands such as Doen and Heidi Merrick, beloved by Kristen Bell, Jessica Alba, Cindy Crawford and Drew Barrymore; the vibe is capricious and feminine – think silk slips, lacy blouses, models in evening dresses with beach blown hair holding up retro-looking surfboards.

The Six Bells, the US home of cottage core, must also surely be another inspiration for the duchess: the shop, based in Brooklyn, sells floral patterned dinner plates, patchwork quilts and tablecloths and retro baby vests. If this all seems a little out of touch, that's the point. Montecito isn't the real world: the average house costs $5.5m (£4.5m), the beach is raked clean every evening, the "club" is the polo club and when you talk about getting takeout you mean a sustainable acai bowl.

The danger, of course, is that fashion moves on and becomes less whimsical: even Montecito isn't immune to changing tastes and a new mood as the world moves towards what seems a much darker era. But as the duchess knows, there will always be demand for the simple pleasures in life and for now she is betting on jam, candles, handmade soap and Friday happy hour at the polo club. And anyway, as feminism is about choice, there is unlikely to be any judgement by her glossy polo wife followers who will choose her every time.

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